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RATHER: Covert American aid to rebels fighting Nicaragua's Sandinista regime became a symbol today of concern over deeper U.S. military involvement in Central America. The House of Representatives, voting largely along party lines, showed its feelings, voting to cut off that aid. But, as Robert Schakne reports, the vote may be a message without muscle.

SCHAKNE: For the second time within three months, the House today rejected all the appeals of the Reagan administration and voted to outlaw the CIA's covert war against Nicaragua. REP. LEE HAMILTON (D.-Ind.): This covert action clearly has brought about wider violence in the area. The covert war has already produced fighting in Nicaragua, increased fighting there, and the war has already widened.

SCHAKNE: The administration's defenders argue that the covert operation should continue until Nicaragua halts its support for Salvador rebels, that nothing else would work. REP. HENRY HYDE (R-Ill.): How do you get a revolutionary, messianic, anti-status quo power to negotiate? Certainly the only way is pressure.

SCHAKNE: But nothing that's happened since July, not even the spectacular hit-and-run attacks by CIA-supported guerrillas in Nicaragua seems to have made any difference to Congress. In the first test vote, the proposal to end the covert war passed, 227-to-194. While the House was debating, Nicaragua's Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto was calling at the State Department, where he said he had presented a new significant proposal for regional peace. MIGUEL D'ESCOTO (Foreign Minister, Nicaragua): And that violence, if continued to go the way it's going, is going to establish its own dynamics irreversibly. I think it's important at this point to make an appeal to sanity.

SCHAKNE: D'Escoto did not publicly disclose what his new proposals were. Despite today's House vote, the debate over covert operations is not over, because the full Senate is expected to vote to the continue the covert war. Most people on Capitol Hill say the final outcome is simply unpredictable. Robert Schakne, CBS News, Capitol Hill.